

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees the “freedom to exercise religious worship...in accordance with established customs, provided that it does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals.” The constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of all seven of the constituent emirates of the federal union and defines all citizens as Muslims. In practice, the government generally followed a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim groups and interfered little in their religious activities. The constitution stipulates that all citizens are equal before the law, without discrimination between citizens on grounds of religious belief. While the law permits Muslims to proselytize non-Muslims, it prohibits efforts to convert Muslims and denies Muslims the freedom to change religion. The government regulated activities and messaging of most Sunni mosques with the stated purpose of combating violent extremism, and required all religious groups to adhere to general restrictions on freedom of assembly and association, including for religious purposes. The government followed a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim religious groups, with some exceptions.

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In tandem with the legal prohibition, societal pressure discouraged conversion from Islam to other religions.

U.S. embassy officials engaged with government officials and representatives of religious groups both formally and informally to discuss religious tolerance and freedom. Embassy officers met with the presidential advisor on religious and judicial affairs and with representatives of the federal General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (known as Awqaf) to encourage continuing efforts to counter religious extremism while maintaining openness to religious diversity. U.S. consulate general officers met with the director general and other officials from the Dubai Department of Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities (emirate-level Awqaf) as well as with representatives of local councils of numerous faiths and denominations. During Ramadan, the embassy and consulate hosted iftars, and the Ambassador hosted a large sohour event (pre-dawn meal eaten before a fast during Ramadan).

Section I. Religious Demography

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The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.5 million (July 2013 estimate). A 2010 UAE National Bureau of Statistics estimate states the population as 8.2 million. An estimated 89 percent of residents are noncitizens. Of the citizens, more than 85 percent are Sunni Muslims and an estimated 15 percent or fewer are Shia Muslims. Shia Muslims are concentrated in the emirates of Dubai and Sharjah.

Noncitizen residents predominantly come from South and Southeast Asia, although there are substantial numbers from the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia, and North America. According to a 2005 Ministry of Economy census, 76 percent of the total population is Muslim, 9 percent is Christian, and 15 percent belongs to other religious groups, primarily Hindu or Buddhist. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Parsis, Bahais, Druze, Sikhs, Ahmadis, Ismailis, Dawoodi Bohra Muslims, and Jews. These estimates differ from census figures because census figures do not take into account the many “temporary” visitors and workers and count Bahais and Druze as Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution guarantees the “freedom to exercise religious worship...in accordance with established customs, provided that it does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals.” The constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of all seven constituent emirates of the federal union and defines all citizens as Muslims. The constitution stipulates that all citizens are equal before the law, without discrimination between citizens on grounds of religious belief. The law denies Muslims the freedom to change religion. While the law permits Muslims to proselytize others, it prohibits efforts to convert Muslims.

The judicial system applies two types of law, depending on the case. Courts apply sharia (Islamic law) for most family law matters, e.g., marriage, divorce, and inheritance, and on rare occasions for criminal matters. Courts apply civil law, based on the French and Egyptian legal systems, for all other matters. Shia Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shia family law cases through a special Shia council rather than the regular judicial system. When Islamic law courts try non-Muslims for criminal offenses, crimes are generally not punishable by Islamic law penalties. In cases punishable by an Islamic law penalty, non-Muslims generally receive civil penalties at the discretion of the judge. Higher courts may overturn or modify Islamic law penalties imposed on non-Muslims.

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The government prohibits proselytizing for any religion other than Islam and prohibits the distribution of non-Islamic religious literature under penalty of criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and deportation. For noncitizens, the government sometimes threatens to revoke the residence permits of persons suspected of proselytizing for a religion other than Islam.

The law prohibits blasphemy, swearing, profanities, insults, and all types of vulgar language and behavior. Offenders are subject to fines, imprisonment, and deportation. The law provides penalties for using the internet to preach against Islam, proselytize Muslims, “abuse” a holy shrine or ritual of any religion, insult any religion, and incite someone to commit sin or contravene national values.

Conversion from Islam to another religion is not recognized, and no data is available detailing the number of conversions. The legal punishment for conversion from Islam is death, although there have been no known prosecutions or legal punishments for apostasy in court. The government annually publishes a list of foreign residents who have converted to Islam. The list varies in length from year to year. There are no known consequences or benefits to having one’s name included in the list.

While the government does not require formal licensing or registration for non-Muslim religious groups, it monitors their growth and development through land grants. The government grants permission to build houses of worship on a case-by-case basis when congregations outgrow smaller private facilities. The government follows a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim religious groups and interferes little in their religious activities.

The Awqaf administers Sunni mosques, many of which must follow government-approved sermons. The Awqaf gives greater flexibility to its mid-level and senior imams to write and deliver weekly sermons to their local congregations. Some Shia mosques follow Awqaf-approved weekly addresses, while other Shia mosques write their own sermons. Shia Muslims have their own council, the Jaafari Waqf Charity Council, which runs Shia affairs.

The federal level Awqaf appoints Sunni imams, except in Dubai, but does not appoint sheikhs (imams) for Shia mosques. Dubai’s Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department (emirate-level Awqaf) controls the appointment of Sunni clergy and their conduct in Dubai mosques.

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Shia adherents worship and maintain their own mosques. Officially, the government considers all Shia mosques private, and they are able to receive funds from the government upon request.

The law prohibits churches from erecting bell towers or displaying crosses on the outside of their premises. The government does not always enforce this law, however, and some churches display crosses on their buildings.

The government does not permit instruction in any religion other than Islam in public schools; however, religious groups may conduct religious instruction for their members at their dedicated religious facilities. Private schools found to be teaching subjects that offend Islam, defame any religion, or contravene the country's ethics and beliefs face potential penalties including closure. Private parochial schools are free to teach their religion within the bounds of government guidelines and to practice religious rituals. All schools regardless of religious affiliation must register with the government. Islamic studies are mandatory in public schools and in private schools serving Muslim children.

Under Islamic law, Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women who are “people of the book,” generally meaning those who are either Christian or Jewish. Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men, however. Because Islam does not consider marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman valid, both parties to such a union are subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds such as fornication outside of marriage, which carries a minimum of one year in jail. The law grants custody of children of non-Muslim women who do not convert to Islam to the Muslim father in the event of a divorce. By law, a non-Muslim woman who fails to convert is also ineligible for naturalization as a citizen and cannot inherit her husband's property unless named as a beneficiary in his will.

The law requires Muslims and non-Muslims to refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking in public during fasting hours in the month of Ramadan.

The law prohibits black magic, sorcery, and incantations, which are punishable by a prison term ranging from six months to three years and deportation.

The government permits many hotels, stores, and other businesses to sell alcohol and pork to non-Muslim residents and foreigners. The government also allows these businesses to acknowledge non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali openly.

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The government permits Shia Muslims to observe Ashura according to their customs with some restrictions.

Government Practices

There were reports of imprisonment and detention. The government, however, generally followed a policy of religious tolerance, and adherents of most major religions worshipped without government interference.

As the state religion, the government favored Islam over other religious groups, and conversion to Islam was viewed positively.

There were reports of arrests based upon religious beliefs or practices. In October Sharjah Police arrested an Iraqi man who claimed to have magic powers to solve personal problems.

The government funded or subsidized almost 95 percent of the approximately 5,000 Sunni mosques and all Sunni imams were government employees. The government considered 5 percent of Sunni mosques private, and several mosques had large private endowments.

The Awqaf oversaw most issues related to Islamic affairs. It distributed weekly guidance to most Sunni imams regarding subject matter, themes, and content of the weekly Friday Islamic sermons and published a Friday sermon script every week, and posted the guidance online on the Awqaf's website. It also ensured that junior clergy did not deviate frequently or significantly from the approved sermons. The Awqaf continued a three-tier system in which junior imams followed the Awqaf Friday sermon script closely, mid-level imams prepared sermons according to the topic or subject matter selected by Awqaf authorities, and senior imams had the flexibility to choose their own subject and content for their Friday sermons. The Awqaf encouraged "improvisation of speeches" under these guidelines with the constraint that the speech was not to exceed 30 minutes. Most imams were non-citizens, and a significant number were Egyptian or Syrian. The advisor to the president on judicial and religious affairs and the chairman of the Awqaf and its director general regularly represented the country at Islamic, ecumenical, and Christian conferences and events abroad. They also met regularly with religious leaders in the country.

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Non-Muslim groups, as well as Shia and other Muslim minority groups, reportedly provided copies of sermons and meeting agendas to local religious authorities upon irregular government request.

The government encouraged citizens to avoid tendencies and ideologies it considered “extremist.” Religious authorities coordinated public awareness campaigns about the dangers of violent extremism with advertisements and television commercials. The government launched an International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, known as Hedayah (“Guidance” in Arabic), in December 2012 in Abu Dhabi during the ministerial meetings of the Global Counterterrorism Forum. In November the president issued a federal law officially establishing Hedayah as an independent center.

Immigration authorities routinely asked foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on residence applications. There were reports that some Shia residents declared themselves Sunni or Christian in their residence applications because they feared how immigration authorities might perceive their faith. In addition there were reports that Jewish residents, fearing discrimination, declared themselves members of another faith, such as Buddhism. Ministry of Interior officials asserted the government collected information on religious affiliation only for demographic statistical analysis. There were reports, however, that religious affiliation affected the issuance or renewal of visas or residence permits. The reports indicated that the government required some Shia Muslims to leave the country, often by cancelling or declining to renew residency permits or visas. The employers of several Shia university students, professors, and professionals, some of Iranian heritage, reportedly told them the authorities had not granted or extended their residence permits. Consequently, they had to leave the country. There were reports that authorities cancelled the residency permits of some Shia business owners.

There was no formal method of granting official status to religious groups other than granting them the use of land for constructing a building, and no national standard for approving land grants. Non-Muslim groups and some Muslim minority groups could own houses of worship by requesting a land grant and permission from the local ruler to build a compound (the title for the land remained with the ruler). Those with land grants did not pay rent on the property. Several emirates also waived utility payments for religious buildings. Rulers of the individual emirates exercised autonomy in choosing whether to grant access to land and permission to build houses of worship within their emirates. A few religious leaders stated the government was more likely to grant access to land to

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groups representing monotheistic religions. Some religious groups reportedly refrained from requesting land because of political sensitivities.

Although the government approved some permits for new buildings, existing churches could not accommodate all worshippers. This resulted in overcrowding at some churches, and, on occasion, forced congregations to meet in private clubs and meetinghouses, private residences, hotels, open courtyards, and other non-religious rental facilities.

There were over 35 Christian churches in the country built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they are located. Some denominations lacked physical churches of their own. Larger churches allowed these denominations to meet in existing church space. During the year, there was an increase in the number of land grants for the construction of non-Muslim religious facilities, including churches. Overcrowding remained a problem, however, as new facilities were still under construction. In some cases, zoning policies required compounds located at some distance from the residential areas in which members of these groups lived, potentially limiting attendance. In June the country's second Catholic church opened in Ras al Khaimah – the first was in Dubai. There were seven Coptic Orthodox churches in the country: two in Dubai, one in Sharjah, one in Fujairah, one in Abu Dhabi, and two in Ras Al Khaimah, including a new cathedral. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) opened a center for worship in Abu Dhabi in February.

There were no synagogues for the small foreign resident Jewish population. The Jewish community, however, observed holidays and ceremonies in private residences or rented hotel space without interference.

Two Hindu temples operated in Dubai. In 2012, a Sikh Temple opened for worship in Dubai. There were no Buddhist temples, but the Sri Lankan embassy held monthly religious services open to the public. Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs conducted religious ceremonies in private homes without interference.

The government permitted non-Muslim groups to raise money from their congregations and from abroad. Due to government restrictions, some Muslim and non-Muslim groups had difficulty spending the funds they raised. Religious groups openly advertised religious functions in the press, including holiday celebrations, memorial services, religious conventions, choral concerts, and fundraising events.

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Customs authorities routinely reviewed the contents of religious materials imported into the country. Non-Muslim religious leaders reported that customs authorities rarely questioned the entry of religious materials such as Bibles and hymnals into the country unless the materials were printed in Arabic or related to paganism or sorcery.

The country's two internet service providers, Etisalat and Du, occasionally blocked web sites containing religious information. This included information on the Bahai Faith, Judaism, atheism, negative critiques of Islam, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity.

Christian primary and secondary schools, in which students were generally free to study Christianity and perform religious rituals, were located in four emirates. In addition to other existing non-Muslim cemeteries, the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai donated land for Christian cemeteries, and Abu Dhabi donated land for a Bahai cemetery.

There were three operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community, one each in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, and Dubai, and the Hindu community reported that these were sufficient to meet present demand. The first crematorium and Indian cemetery for Hindu expatriates in Sharjah was formally opened in February, but was reported not to be fully operational as of November. The government required residents and non-residents to obtain official permission for the use of cremation facilities in every instance, and authorities routinely granted such permission. The government allowed people from all religious groups except Islam to use the cremation facilities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal pressures discouraged conversion from Islam to other religions. Those who did convert from Islam to another religion concealed their new faith, were persuaded or coerced to return to Islam, or left the country to avoid the social stigma of converting. As the government did not recognize or permit conversion from Islam to another religion, churches recognized converts from all religions except Islam. Many non-Muslim women faced strong societal pressure to convert to Islam, especially upon marriage to a Muslim.

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Society viewed conversion to Islam positively. According to reports from the Dubai based Dar Al Ber Society, more than 1,650 people converted to Islam during the year.

There were some religiously intolerant editorials and opinion pieces in both the English and Arabic language electronic and print media. Some news opinion pieces and editorials contained anti-Semitic remarks with no government response. There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Holiday foods, decorations, posters, and books were widely available during Christian holidays, and Christmas trees and elaborate decorations were prominent features at major malls and hotels. The news media regularly printed reports of religious holiday celebrations, including church services and Hindu festivals.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador met regularly with Presidential Advisor on Religious and Judicial Affairs Ali Al Hashimi during Ramadan and on other occasions. U.S. embassy and consulate general officers met with government officials and representatives of religious communities to discuss religious tolerance and freedom.

Embassy officers met with presidential advisor Al Hashimi and Awqaf officials to encourage them to maintain openness to religious diversity while continuing efforts to counter violent extremism. Consulate general officers met with the director general and other officials from the Dubai Department of Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities (emirate-level Awqaf). During Ramadan, both the U.S. embassy and consulate hosted iftars, and the Ambassador hosted a large sohour event.